

Mapping Your Lifeline

A first step in Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) — taking a wide view over your whole life before the detailed work begins.

Schauer, M., Neuner, F., Elbert T. (2024). Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) For Survivors of Traumatic Stress (3rd edition). Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe Publishing

WHAT IT IS

The lifeline is usually the first step in NET. We map your whole life onto a timeline — one end marking your birth, the other left open for the years still to come — using ribbon, flowers for the good times and stones for the harder ones, each labelled in a few words. It's usually completed in a single session, and gives us a map to work from as we build your narrative in the sessions that follow.

HOW WE DO IT

If positive moments don't come easily at first, we might think instead about people who mattered to you, and what they gave you. We keep a photo or sketch of the finished lifeline to return to as we work through your story — some people prefer a simple paper-and-pencil version instead of ribbon and objects, and either works well.

WHERE IT COMES FROM

The lifeline was first developed for trauma therapy with children, as part of a version of NET called KIDNET, before being adapted for adults living with multiple or complex trauma. It's now used with both children and adults worldwide, and is usually introduced early, before the detailed narrative work begins.

WHAT IT CAN (AND CAN'T) DO

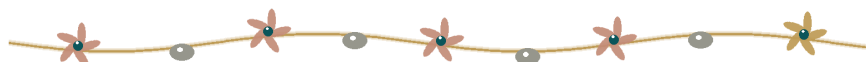
On its own, the lifeline offers a valuable overview, but it isn't a treatment in itself — its benefit comes from what follows: working through the stones in detail, session by session. Placing an experience on the timeline can also show where a particular rule for living first took shape, and why it made complete sense then — often bringing more compassion for yourself when that rule is hard to apply now, and sometimes allowing you to choose whether to leave it where it came from, rather than carrying it forward.

TRY IT: SKETCH YOUR OWN LIFELINE

If you'd like a preview, jot down a few moments below — a word or two each, in any order. We'll build this properly together, with ribbon, flowers and stones, in session.

A few good moments —

BIRTH



TODAY

A few harder ones —

This sheet offers general information about the lifeline exercise and isn't a substitute for an individually tailored treatment plan. If you have any questions, I'm always happy to talk them through with you.